



## When a Loved One Stops Eating

By Cassandra Van Dyck

*“There is something profoundly satisfying about sharing a meal. Eating together, breaking bread together, is one of the oldest and most fundamentally of unifying human experiences.” - Barbara Coloroso*



When a loved one stops eating, it can be very worrisome. Along with worry, caregivers may also experience guilt. Caregivers may feel that providing food is one of the ways they can contribute to the well-being of their loved one when others are able to provide more complex medical care. When feeding becomes challenging, they may feel frustrated or helpless.

Some may think that an elderly person's reason for not eating is that they no longer wish to live. Though it could be true, there are many other reasons a care partner may not be eating. As people age, taste buds, sense of smell, and metabolism rates can change. Seniors often need fewer calories than once before. Some other common reasons for not eating include: medication side effects, dental problems, gastrointestinal changes (e.g., lactose intolerance), constipation, etc. There is a possibility of more serious health issues associated with loss of appetite, which is why it is always important to discuss any changes with a

health care professional.

Although some changes in appetite may require the support of a health care professional, there are some challenges that can be solved with the help of caregivers. Care partners may not be eating because of loneliness and lack of motivation. Caregivers can help by talking to their loved ones about the importance of nutrition and encouraging socialization when eating. Socializing is an often over-looked, important part of eating. Many people grow up with family meals and continue to enjoy them into adulthood with partners, children, colleagues and friends. If seniors are living alone, they may be missing out on the connection they once received while enjoying meals, which could impact their motivation to eat. If you feel that your loved one could benefit from eating meals with other people, consider talking to your family about setting up dates and times to eat together. Consider contacting local community and seniors centers to see what they offer. Many will offer meals at a low cost for many seniors and some even provide transportation.

If your loved one is eating but you feel that they are not eating enough, focus on nutrition density instead of portion size. Olive oil, nuts, peanut butter, and avocados are good options. Caregivers can also help by making themselves aware of the side effects of medication that their care partners are taking. This can help ease worries and allow adaptations or substitutions to be made. Creating a regular eating schedule can also provide structure which may encourage consistency so care partners' appetites may stabilize. Stocking the fridge and cupboards with your loved one's favourite foods may also be helpful. No one enjoys eating foods they don't like! Every-one's quality of life is greatly improved when they are able to eat the foods they want to eat.

As mentioned, if your loved one continues not to eat, it may be necessary to involve health care professionals. Prepare a list of questions to ask your doctor so you can learn how to best support your care partner. Here are some questions that may be helpful:

- Are there any side effects to the medications they're taking that may be impacting their ability to eat?
- Are there any other reasons their appetite may be changing?
- Is there anything I can do to support their positive eating habits?

Your family doctor may be a helpful first person to speak with about your concerns, but you may also wish to contact health care professionals who specialize in nutrition. Vancouver Coastal Health has registered dietitians who complete nutrition assessments and recommend and implement therapeutic care plans for patients. More information can be found at [www.alliedhealth.vch.ca/dietetics.html](http://www.alliedhealth.vch.ca/dietetics.html)

Some other resources that may be helpful are:

**Counsellors:** Counsellors can be great people for yourself or your loved one to speak with if you are having trouble managing your emotions around your loved one's changing eating habits. They may also be helpful for your care partner if their changes in eating are due to psychological reasons. For referrals, speak to your family doctor or call Vancouver Coastal Health's Mental Health Services' team at 604-904-3540.

**Keystone Eldercare Solutions:** Provides a wide range of resources and support to help guide you through caregiving challenges. Staff are available to speak with directly if you would like to have a conversation about your concerns. For more information, visit: [www.keystoneeldercare.net](http://www.keystoneeldercare.net)

**Book:** Denholm, Diana B. *The Caregiving Wife's Handbook: Caring for Your Seriously Ill Husband, Caring for Yourself.*

**Book:** McVicker, Barbara. *Stuck in the Middle: Shared Stories and Tips on Caring for Mom and Dad.*

*"Asking for help is an affirmation that you believe in yourself, you recognize an answer is available, and you are open to receive it." - Alan Cohen*